

Natural History: the Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno

ABSTRACT

Theodor Adorno's concept of 'natural history' [Naturgeschichte] was central for a number of Adorno's theoretical projects, but remains elusive. In this essay, I analyse different dimensions of the concept of natural history, distinguishing amongst (a) a reflection on the normative and methodological bases of philosophical anthropology and critical social science; (b) a conception of critical memory oriented toward the preservation of the memory of historical suffering; and (c) the notion of 'mindfulness of nature in the subject' provocatively asserted in Max Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These strands are united by the notion of transience and goal of developing a critical theory sensitive to the transient in history. The essay concludes by suggesting some implications of an expanded concept of natural history for issues in the discourse theory of Jürgen Habermas.

KEYWORDS: Natural History, Adorno, Critical Theory, Memory, Habermas

The concept of 'natural history' [*Naturgeschichte*] is surely a candidate for the most troubling and most resistant theoretical element of Theodor W. Adorno's intellectual legacy for contemporary Critical Theory. On one level, the extreme difficulties involved in assessing the content and relevance of this

concept are interior to the work of Adorno itself: developed very early in his career, the concept of natural history plays a crucial and, typically enough, often subterranean role in virtually all of Adorno's work, from the *Kantgesellschaft* lecture "On the Idea of Natural History" that Adorno delivered in 1932, through to the negative philosophical anthropology of *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, to the natural history 'model' and the destruction of the Hegelian vision of World Spirit in the *Negative Dialectics*. This wealth of theoretical formulations, clues, sketches, and outlines indicates that the concept of natural history is among the most persistent and influential theoretical structures in Adorno's work, rivalling (of course related intimately to) the concept of the dialectic itself.

A reception of Adorno's concept of natural history also questions the relation between the 'classical' Critical Theory of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Marcuse, and the transformation (and large-scale rejection) of the foundations of classical Critical Theory by Habermas from the late 1960s to the present. As we assess the meaning and significance of Adorno's concept of natural history, we are (if we are to do more than intellectual history) also assessing the sorts of intractable theoretical rifts that separate Adorno's projects and failures from the grand transformation that took place with the introduction of the discourse-theoretical paradigm in critical social theory. And any assessment of the contemporary relevance of the concept of natural history must refer to contemporary debates on the future of Habermasian discourse theory; its specific benefits and disadvantages, and whether the latter can be supplemented by intellectual resources from out of the same tradition of Critical Theory. The present reading of natural history, then, is an effort to promote a more creative and pragmatic dialogue between discourse theory and classic or first-generation Critical Theory, and assumes that such a dialogue is not just a matter of hermeneutic interest.

Adorno's conception of natural history will predictably resist encapsulation and easy definition; as a *concept* (more on this in a moment) it performs, rather than simply denotes, a set of tense relationships between opposed alternatives. Natural history encompasses: (a) the overall project of a negative dialectics, with its goal of discovering the elements of a critical social theory from within the very centre of the conceptual structure of idealist

philosophical texts; (b) the demand for a non-systematic philosophy that would embrace the principle of the historical or textual fragment both in its form and its application; (c) the tangled and claustrophobic conceptual mirror-play of Adorno's later philosophical exegeses, culminating in *Negative Dialectics*, which sought to wring a faint sense of some utopian residue lying outside of conceptual thought, through the most extreme performance of conceptual self-scrutiny. Under certain presuppositions about the tenor of Adorno's later work, *Naturgeschichte* certainly also implies; (d) a pervasive and ultimately paralysing sense of dread and helplessness in the face of a homogeneous and virtually irresistible history of domination, and a corollary sense of capitulation at the vision of world history as continuous catastrophe; and, (e) the most distinctive but perhaps least remarked-on aspect of Adorno's thinking, that is, his singular ability to endow even the most abstract of his subjects with an emotional charge, an affective dimension of feeling (of sadness, or disappointment, or yearning, or some synthesis of these three for which there is no precise name) that renders virtually all of his texts 'subjective' even when methodological objectivity would have been most demanded, and contributes, in large measure, to that quality of Adorno's own work that he described as the inner resistance to 'summarisation'; a quality that now, a quarter century after his death, also appears as the difficulty in contemporary appropriations of the methodological innovations and critical strategies that might still offer powerful challenges and resources to contemporary problems in the critical theory of society.

After a brief reading of the concept of natural history in Adorno's early eponymous essay: (I) I will try to distinguish the different valences of the concept of natural history, levels that we need to analyse separately if we are to see how the concept operates on the level of methodology; (II) I will then propose that, if we distinguish these levels, we will see that what Adorno has in mind with the concept of natural history is in effect a kind of strategy for the synthesis of methodological and normative considerations; a formal challenge to the question of methodological objectivity in philosophy and the social sciences, on the one hand, and existential-phenomenological versions of temporality and historicity on the other. I will describe natural history as the research protocol for the social scientific encounter with historical contingency: a research protocol that Adorno himself never ultimately fulfilled.

In a concluding section, (III) I will try to apply these conclusions to the state of contemporary (Habermasian) critical theory, arguing that in questions of the relation between normative theory and philosophical anthropology and in the discourse—theoretical evacuation of conceptions of memory—Adorno's concept of natural history presents both a formidable criticism and important intellectual resources.

I

I turn first to the 1932 essay, "The Idea of Natural History," in which the context of discussion is the age-old quarrel concerning the relation of historical experience and historical knowledge to a supposedly eternalised ahistorical essence; the more immediate context is the success of Heidegger's attempts to overcome this dualism by describing the essence of *Dasein* as itself historicity. The idea of natural history is introduced as a critique and corrective of the perspective of *Being and Time*. Adorno's main purpose, initially, is a dialectical one: he wants to demonstrate that the concepts of 'nature' and 'history' cannot be regarded as ontological essences without idealising them and rendering them into mythical self-parodies. History and nature are concepts that mutually and dialectically define one another, and can 'flip' into their other at the moment of their most extreme conceptual formulation. Nature, conceived initially and statically as that which lies beyond thought and resists it as origin and ground, appears as timeless, that is, under the idea of mythical repetition, blind fate, and unthinkability, just as history, cut from the idea of nature as a wholly human process of self-constitution, appears as ceaseless innovation and the production of the new.

Both of these perspectives are of course untenable, and Adorno's suggestion here is to ask what happens—what *perspective* emerges—if one is able to allow each concept to develop, in its extreme formulation, to its other. "If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed," writes Adorno,

then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.¹

The idea of natural history, then, is first formulated as a methodological suggestion for a new form of critical historiography that will no longer be beholden to the traditional idealistic versions of timeless nature and historical progress, but will question the very terms of historical research by proposing to investigate precisely that region where historical events, by virtue of their very nature as time-bound and singular—as objects of a critical memory—come to appear as the operations of nature, while nature itself, in turn, is criticised as a figure of timelessness only insofar as it is linked to the social practices and rational inquiries of humans.

It is not just the purely intellectual, dialectical activity of de-familiarising these two terms that interests Adorno. He is also trying to describe the peculiar *productivity* that occurs as a consequence of this process. Nature and history, de-familiarised, coalesce into natural history, which is something very different, a perspective that Adorno explicates with references to the pre-Marxist works of Lukács (*Theory of the Novel*) and Benjamin (*Origin of the German Mourning-Play*). One way of expressing this is to resort to a traditional language of epistemology: nature and history are concepts and as such refer to a range of human practices of the organisation of otherwise disparate sets of empirical experiences. If dialectically fused into their ‘zero point’ of indifference, however, these two concepts generate an idea, which is a modality of concept with no correlate in any given experience, and in fact, according to an epistemological claim borrowed from the preface of Benjamin’s book on baroque drama, also, *contra* Kant, has no regulatory function for the acquisition of new experience either. On the contrary, it appears ‘idea’ here synthesises dialectically opposed concepts in such a way that, while remaining a sub-species of concept, it has the opposite function of *disintegrating* or de-organising what is given (or what wants to be given) in experience.² The idea of natural history realises its truth-content through its capacity to *degrade* or disrupt the appearance of what is ‘given’ in experience, insofar as what is given is in itself a reflection of a false totalisation of the ensemble of social and material conditions specific to a given socio-economic constellation. In a departure from this parasitic use of the traditional language of epistemology, however, and an (equally parasitic) use of the language of phenomenology, Adorno will conclude that the idea of natural history amounts to a degradation of experience as a perspective, or a *way of seeing*.

Adorno contends that the dialectical crossing-point of nature and history constructs a particular optics. Natural history, for Adorno, is the attempt to combine Lukács' notion of 'second nature' with Benjamin's conception of the 'allegorical way of seeing'. In Lukács, Adorno finds the vocabulary to describe history turned nature; that is, human products and creations of human history which no longer appear to be so, but rather, bereft of their integral relation to a world of human meaning, appear paradoxically as artificially natural: what Lukács calls 'the world of convention' is the world of de-valued or no-longer 'criticisable' tradition. Discrete elements of a devalued lifeworld do not simply vanish, but linger, frozen, in the form of fragments. Second nature in this sense is a world in which the products of social action have congealed into a law-like but dead and meaningless mass of codes, practices, institutions and objects, a world of "estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers."³ In other words, the *reified* world of intersubjective interaction takes on the appearance of nature insofar as it no longer exhibits the characteristic features of a collective creation; insofar as its genesis narrative is no longer re-constructible. Already we can see that this early notion of 'second nature' suggests the idea of a lifeworld whose processes of symbolic reproduction of meaning has gone horribly awry; a lifeworld which, from the perspective of its participants, does not seem to be reproducing itself at all, or seems to do so only behind their backs according to mechanisms that are opaque, and generating meanings that can only be guessed at due to their complexity and their lack of public accessibility.

Again, what Adorno emphatically has in mind here, far more than any substantive critical reading of the pathological side of disenchanted lifeworlds, is the singular "methodological proposal" (as Fredric Jameson names it)⁴ that such pathologies will remain closed off to critical investigation until the critic is able to bring about a *change of perspective*, and it is this changed perspective that Adorno ultimately means by the concept of natural history. The vision of a social world that has died, and whose fragmented form nevertheless continues to radiate obscure meanings in the form of cipher-like and riddling configurations of discrete empirical elements, is intended as a sort of methodological *shock*: "If I should succeed at giving you a notion of the idea of natural history," Adorno writes, "you would first of all have to experience something of the $\Theta\alpha\nu\mu\alpha\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$, [shock] that this question portends. Natural

history is not a synthesis of natural and historical methods, but a change of perspective.”⁵

Second nature, then, what Lukács described as “a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; . . . a charnel house of rotted interiorities,”⁶ provides the optics for a critical challenge: to *interpret* the world of shattered relationships (between subjects and nature no less than between subjects and one another) in order to uncover its characteristic pathologies and cloaking techniques. Where the early Lukács saw the call for a metaphysical-romantic quest for personal reawakening, Adorno is after a method for social criticism. And in this crucial turn from the subject to the objects of reification, Adorno turns to Benjamin’s notion of the ‘allegorical vision’ to supplement Lukács.

Adorno’s transformation of Benjamin’s notion of the historical essence of baroque allegory would be a very large topic in itself, and has already been discussed in great detail.⁷ Here, rather than go over much old ground, I will merely recall that, from Benjamin, Adorno is most interested in the notion of natural history as the crossing point of physical matter and the production of meaning. Benjamin read the baroque allegorists as beholding nature itself as essentially historical. From the theological perspective of fallen nature the baroque regarded material objects themselves as containing within their very finitude, monadologically as it were, the compacted moral-religious history of the world, which is to say that they—the objects of physical nature—appear as allegories of transience [*Vergänglichkeit*]. And, conversely, human history is transmuted in this ‘allegorical way of seeing’ as the spectacle of the progressive revelation of the natural, that is, the corporeal kernel of each and every human effort to construct meaning in history: the corporeal is equated with the mortal, which is once again transience. History is translated to the spectacle of dead and dying nature, to ruin, collapse, vain hopes, unsuccessful plans, and the repeated depiction of the expiring creature.⁸ As the Benjamin scholar Beatrice Hanssen has written, ‘natural history’ thus aims, ultimately, at refuting the claim toward memory as absolute recuperation, as ‘recollection,’ that Hegel had invoked in the closing moments of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁹

Transience thus marks the very core of the idea of natural history. As a changed *perspective*, the concept of natural history assumes some important features

of Heideggerian world-disclosure, though this is a point that Adorno himself would surely have detested.¹⁰ It is world-disclosure in a very specific sense, for the new world that is disclosed through a novel use of language is precisely a world of *loss* and a spectre of meaninglessness. The idea entails the corrosion, the petrification, or the freezing-up of any large, harmonising and ultimately delusive claims toward trends of totality and meaning in the historical process, and instead an insight of the historical process itself as generating only concrete, singular, and utterly empirical facts and bodies, each 'transient,' which is to say, incapable of being incorporated into a meaning-giving conception of historical continuity and historical experience. Again, Adorno seems to understand this perspective on the singular and contingent within historical experience in terms of the 'riddling' or puzzle-like character that such contingent facts and bodies assume from the perspective of natural history. He implies that what is at stake in this introduction of fragments and concrete contingencies, deployed against totalising narratives of historical development, is an alternative logic of historiography according to which insight into history is to proceed by the construction of constellations of discrete elements of recovered historical experience, which then, suddenly and virtually involuntarily yield forth objectively valid insights into the historical process as a whole, when such constellations are 'read' in the proper interpretive light. This logic, otherwise so thoroughly Benjaminian, differs from Benjamin on one vital point. Constellations, as Adorno insists in the 1931 essay "The Actuality of Philosophy," are not to be regarded as providing 'solutions' to problems posed by the assemblage of recovered cultural material. Rather, such solutions are to be regarded as directions toward a political practice that would seek to dissolve the puzzle-like character of the real, rather than merely solving it. Firmly refusing any crypto-theological speculations in which the truth-content generated from acts of construction is referred to some substantiality beyond the phenomenal, Adorno insists that critical construction is linked with praxis:

He who interprets by searching beyond the phenomenal world for a world in itself which forms its foundation and support, acts mistakenly like someone who wants to find in the riddle the reflection of a being which lies behind it, a being mirrored in the riddle, in which it is contained. Instead, the function of riddle solving is to illuminate the riddle-Gestalt like light-

ning, and to sublate it, not to persist behind the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophical interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time.¹¹

Regardless of how we might assess the success of this claim to establishing a connection to praxis,¹² Adorno's firm conviction here is of the connection—in fact the identity—of the recovery of the singular, the historically contingent, and the transient, and the broader aims of unmasking critique:

Just as riddle solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to come together into a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears—so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations . . . into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears.¹³

One way to understand the notion of 'natural history,' then, is to suggest that, as a form of shocking, disorienting, or disintegrative world-disclosure, it is intended to provide the necessary methodological preparation for the construction of such constellations, even if, as so often, Adorno declines to elaborate on precisely what sort of method could account for the spontaneous, *blitzhaft* way in which such constellations are to yield their moments of objective truth (which Benjamin calls 'dialectical images').¹⁴

However, I would like to suspend discussion of this 'constellative' logic for a moment, and focus instead on the methodological claim implied by the application of the optics of natural history. Again, the Benjaminian contribution to this notion is that, at the dialectical crossing point of nature and history stands the category of transience, the singularity that cannot be incorporated. In transience, nature can in its very naturalness only appear as historical, since it appears as the dimension that is fatefully condemned to the endless production of things that pass away, that take up time and then are not there any more. History, as the span of temporal duration inhabited by human action, is drained of its claims to inner coherence and meaning, by

the vision of its products and projects freezing into natural things; bodies that decay and die. Transience, as a perspective, concentrates on the singular, wholly contingent fragment of historical experience, and Adorno's insistence that such fragments be taken as ciphers or clues to some otherwise wholly inaccessible dimension of historical truth is, at this point at least, entirely Benjaminian—as are the virtually insurmountable problems entailed by the effort to expand theoretically on the possibilities of a logic of 'constructing constellations', problems that would, shortly after the "Natural History" lecture, lead to a deep rift between Benjamin and Adorno.¹⁵

I have been emphasising the methodological and virtually strategic aspect of Adorno's idea of natural history, which is the notion that, as an optical method or a perspective, it could bring about a shock-effect on the part of the critical researcher, thus constructing the range of possible subject matter for critical historiography. Adorno of course recognised that this notion of a shock was in and of itself an inadequate characterisation of his project. If, in the "Natural History" essay, Adorno thus rather suddenly introduces a number of theoretical postulates, it is in large measure to defray the suspicion that the de-familiarisation of historical consciousness that he is proposing may be nothing more than a sort of Schellingean re-enchantment of the category of historical time. "[H]istory," Adorno writes, "as it lies before us, presents itself as thoroughly discontinuous, not only in that it contains disparate circumstances and facts, but also because it contains structural disparities:"¹⁶ which is to say that natural history expresses first and foremost the insight into the unevenness, the lack of unity, in the experience of historical time. On an initial level, the 'structural disparity' of the experience of historical time can be taken as existing between two incommensurate and ultimately ambiguous aspects of historical time, which Adorno rather unsatisfactorily characterises as the presence of the "mythical archaic, natural material of history," that is, repetition, a figure that Adorno had used in the beginning of his essay to define nature, and "that which surfaces as dialectically and emphatically new," which Adorno had initially defined as history itself. That the archaic-repetitive and the new 'intertwine' in historical experience amounts to the claim that these two are just as much capable of dialectical development, to the point where their identity reverses, as are history and nature as concepts. Adorno refers not (or not only) to some abstract dimension of cultural mem-

ory classifiable as 'the mythic' on the basis of its purported timelessness, but literally to myths: he means that the very image of timelessness and repetition, of fantastic age, that clings like an aura to myths, stories that appear as archetypes that have always been with us, appears also as historically dynamic, which is to say that the image of timelessness is continuously created in the historical present and recast retrospectively. The 'disparate' character of myths—their unsettling tendency to say extremely modern things in the process of being old, which so fascinated the intellectual milieu from the Romantics to Freud—is, as a moment of natural history, now to be seen as the dialectical flash-point between nature and history as such. Very old myths neither re-win nor repeat actuality, but actuality occurs in the process in which the archaic is *constituted* in the process of the construction of the present. Hence, what appears as frozen only does so by its constitution through a dialectic. Adorno's example for this observation is, appropriately enough, the myth of Chronos, but we cannot help thinking of the later appropriation of the myth of Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which the status of the hero as the 'prototype' or *Urbild* of the bourgeois subject would mean not so much the survival of the timeless, but the construction of the image of timelessness through the present, hence the sort of collision between 'structural disparities' of past and present that make the revelation of the critical potential of the myth possible, and that serve to undermine from within the claim of seamless historical progress and temporal continuity which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as itself a moment of myth in the bad sense. Historical newness and mythic repetition construct and resist one another at the same time; generating the objective possibility of the perception of concrete historical moments in which this tension is impacted while simultaneously resisting the temptation to resolve this tension in any totalising sense of historical unity. Time is out of joint; the present is shot through with the past, and the past is seeded with moments of dialectical actuality. Where the present appears most up to date, natural history is designed to reveal a landscape strewn with relics, antiquities, and anachronisms; where the historical past appears at its most conveniently ancient and distant remove we unexpectedly encounter recapitulations, anticipations and projections: the result—or the intended result, in any case—is to bring about a sort of temporal vertigo, in which the image of a 'non-antagonistic' present is demythologised and revealed as illusion, as *Schein*, at the same time as the recovery of the historically contingent

and concrete provides the chance for a glimpse into an alternative history, a recovery of a different, critical form of recollection.

II

With this in mind we can perhaps usefully distinguish amongst three different if intimately related dimensions of the ‘shocking’ effect of the concept of natural history, along with the revisions in the theories of history and time consciousness that they would support. In distinguishing these three levels, or better, interlocking strategies for temporal re-visioning, I hope to suggest the extent to which the perspective of natural history entails the adoption of a critical theory of recollection, or at least demands the attempt to formulate one.

(a) Natural History and Philosophical Anthropology

On the initial level, certainly, Adorno’s efforts to synthesise nature and history into a form of *Welterschließung* ought to be seen in relation to a familiar definition of natural history: the natural-scientific understanding of the developmental history of the natural world that emerged most clearly with the great period of naturalism from Buffon to Darwin: the task of describing the human species, and the historical emergence of those human faculties and aptitudes that define the species through its natural-historical interaction with a variety of external environments. Natural history implies a philosophical anthropology, as opposed to idealist introspection, as the mode appropriate for the exploration of the human condition.¹⁷ The practice of philosophical anthropology depends on a changed perspective of historical time: The quarter-million year history of the young human species is *both* far too long to be incorporated into familiar narratives of historical development, while simultaneously absurdly short in relation to the scales of natural-historical time that evolutionary theory imposes. Such a conflict produces the sort of historical disorientation in relation to the span of recorded human history that Adorno must have at least partly had in mind in his concept of natural history; in any event, the awareness of a requirement for a complete and uncharted transformation of time consciousness (which could serve as a thumbnail definition of intellectual modernity itself) had, for the generations after Darwin, the precipitate in an enduring interest, even a compulsion, in the retelling of

genesis narratives and the recreation of phylogenies, perhaps in an effort to forestall the impending sense of meaninglessness conveyed by the implications of Darwinian theory as much as anything else. For the dialectic of the vastly old and the impossibly new that is conveyed by this first sense of natural history is always accompanied by another, as it were, supplemental dialectic of meaning and meaninglessness; science explains the world, and thus robs it of its intrinsic meaning. Specifically, the implications of 'deep time' and Darwinism forbid any familiar strategies for the preservation of meaning in history, since the span of species time, let alone geological time, cannot be reconciled to the vision of history as being morally structured. There is simply too much time without anything in it; no moral appeals to the singularity of a given historical event—in the sense of its qualitative difference, its being deserving of remembrance—can withstand the scale of a quarter of a million years of hunting and gathering, let alone ten billion years of geological history, with the implications of our eventual, if not impending replacement by other dominant species who cannot be expected to share our moral preoccupations. (In this sense Nietzsche's attempt to 'moralise' the perspective of deep time by making the thought of eternal return the ultimate test of a tough mind seems, in hindsight, a curiously low hurdle, since the thought of 'persistent' if not eternal newness seems far more frightening than that of eternal repetition.)

Adorno was particularly sensitive to this dialectic, in which science re-enchants its subject matter by appropriating its own self-defining stories and recasting them in temporal terms that can be told only from its own perspective: *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* deployment of natural history seems to focus to an unacknowledged degree on the abyssal nature of time itself in its development of the historical dimension of the entwining of myth and enlightenment. The image of a great age cannot be kept dialectically pristine from that of the most recent; while science's mythicising tendency attempted to incorporate this 'new' time into an older narrative of historical progress, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (in perhaps its most purely Nietzschean moment) demonstrates the ultimately contradictory aspect of this attempt. For if reason is nothing other than a natural phenomenon (and as such is both impossibly old and ridiculously young, from the same perspective), then it displays a temporal 'structural disparity' that contradicts its own demands

for temporal continuity and historical progress at every turn. The revelation of reason as nature, as an evolutionary adaptation developed in order to persist in the ur-old struggle for individual biological self-preservation, is one of Adorno's most consistent theoretical ambitions. And yet the sheer 'fact of reason' as itself a part of nature was never in serious doubt; what had to be registered was the extent to which the realisation of the implications of natural history withdrew nature from any possible status as a fixed temporal origin, at the same time as rational subjectivity was robbed of its last illusory refuge in the structures of pure consciousness. In other words, natural history in this first sense shocks not so much through the mere fact of a biological basis for the autonomous ego (for who could ever have doubted such a thing?), but rather by the de-familiarisation of time that is the precondition for this fact, and perhaps above all through the de-familiarisation of meaning in history that is necessarily conveyed with it. This is the sense in which *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* effort to give one final, grim re-telling of the genesis narrative of the present assumes its oddly self-contradictory status: what has often been described as the performative self-contradiction at the heart of the work (if reason has created a *totaler Verblendungszusammenhang* of domination, how to account for the critique of it?) might be better understood as the performance of the dialectic of natural history itself: the critical self-reflection on the delusional genesis narrative of Western reason, which mistakes itself for a story of progress, cannot be squared with the narrative itself, which ought not to allow for its own retelling. This observation, which can be found elsewhere,¹⁸ supports the suspicion that the self-reference problem of the book is basically an attempt to demonstrate, rather than explicate, the peculiarities of time that structure the argument. Fredric Jameson, to take one angle on this problem, observes that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* performs an oddly postmodern trick of synchronisation by positing nature as an origin which it then subsequently renders impossible, as being 'always already' withdrawn from the subject, constituted by the subject, in the very act of subjective self-creation. Hence, origin recedes from the yearning gaze of subjectivity to the degree that it is approached. Once again, the present projects its own past; the new generates its other as archaic.¹⁹ While it is tempting to read the book in this eerily Foucauldian light from time to time, though, it seems to me that a postmodern synchrony (and the concomitant release of otherwise diachronously law-like and ordered relationships into a free space

of contingency) is precisely *not* what Horkheimer and Adorno achieve in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; rather, the dissolving of diachrony that their strangely self-cancelling genesis narrative performs tends far more toward a strange kind of anachronism, a complication rather than an evaporation of time.

(b) Natural History as the Critical Memory of Historical Suffering

What I mean by this can best be seen in another dimension of the optics of natural history: a powerful normative insight that seems all the more startling in light of the corrosion of the normative claims for historical experience that accompanied natural history in its first incarnation. What the first form of de-familiarisation takes away—the possibility of a moral dimension of the experience of time—stages a strange sort of self-recuperation in the central category of transience. This is the modality of natural history that demands a category of *critical memory*.

Earlier we saw Adorno's appropriation of Benjamin's category of the transient creature as the dialectical crossing-point of history and nature. The demythologising effect of this category is clear enough; what is transient loses any plausible claims to permanence, to effect, to continuity. As transient, historical entities appear as bereft and 'always already' ruined, as if their impending moment of complete historical extinction, which defines their very essence, somehow had managed to step in front of itself and precede them in their brief interlude of presence.

What is less clear is the sense in which 'transience' already constitutes a normative category. That which is transient is that whose individuality consists entirely in its status as about-to-go, whose presence, as it were, already can only be defined by its absence. In this sense, transience is the particular fate of historical entities, which, in their fungibility and replaceability, are *historical* entities precisely and only insofar as they pass into history: their essence has been supplanted by their impending non-existence. What is transient is that which has been so converted into material that it loses any claim to distinction, and merely marks time. Transitoriness, in other words, is a temporal relation that is always constituted *retrospectively*, which is to say that that which is transient is that which, as it turns out, can no longer be remembered,

indeed can only be thought at all as that which has been forgotten: in fact 'incapable of being remembered' is a rough equivalent, here, for what Adorno means by '*Vergänglichkeit*'. It is the absence of any meaning-giving structure or context in which an entity can be situated in time; it marks all the huge portions of a shared lifeworld that vanish without a trace as the lifeworld moves through time; elements that are non-recuperable.

The normative dimension of this version of transience consists in the anti-Idealist, specifically anti-Hegelian claim that conditions that render persons transient or unmemorable, non-recuperable in this sense are social conditions that make impossible the memory of historical suffering. Modernity is a memory crisis—a series of disruptions, discontinuities, transformations, and upheavals in the faculties of remembering and forgetting, and the social-political contexts for these faculties.²⁰ This appears most clearly in a famous aphorism in the notes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "All reification is a forgetting."²¹ Adepts of the book will recall that the line occurs at the end of the section entitled "*Le Prix du Progres*," which quotes at considerable length the reflections of the French physician Pierre Flourens, who opposed the use of chloroform as an anaesthetic during surgical procedures on the grounds of evidence that the chemical did not in fact deaden physical pain—quite the opposite—but merely rendered the patient incapable of remembering it. Flourens objects to this grisly fact as "too high a price to be paid for progress."

In their commentary Horkheimer and Adorno point out that, had Flourens' warnings and those like them been heeded, and had the natural sciences and instrumental reason as a whole been able to incorporate some non-instrumental criterion of appropriateness to regulate their own expansion (for example, an undamaged mimesis that would have established a kind of bodily sympathy as an ineffaceable moment within reason), the "dark paths of the divine world order would have, for once, been justified."

Flourens' reservations in the face of the logic of scientific discovery, on the contrary, implied an inner connection between the growth of rationality and the compulsory forgetting of bodily suffering and vulnerability; indeed Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the latter is the condition for the possibility of the former. ("The loss of memory is a transcendental condition for science.")²² Memory-loss, specifically the forgetfulness of the overwhelming

fact of the sheer quantum of physical pain that constitutes the ‘material’ of history, thus becomes the requisite accomplishment for the institution of subjectivity, a clear if somewhat elliptical negation of Nietzsche’s natural-historical argument connecting the inauguration of memory with the fear of physical pain in the form of punishment,²³ as well as the dominant Hegelianism that affirms the connection between history and suffering only by dismissing bodily life as timeless while effacing the memory of suffering in a final *Er-innerung* of world spirit.²⁴ In this sense, in the sense of some deep, new / old connection between the ability to dehumanise and the ability to forget, that dimension of humans that is body, Horkheimer and Adorno argue for a functional equivalent between ‘that which suffers’ and ‘that which cannot (must not) be remembered.’ In other words, the concept of natural history—here in the sense of the creature who suffers in time—serves to reveal that *transience* itself is in the context of the world as it is already a moral term, insofar as transience is the mark of the *forgetting* of the bodily suffering that constitutes the material of historical time.

Such a claim asserts the possibility of a critical memory that, by resisting the effacement of suffering in time, also exposes those social and material conditions that sustain and require the reign of amnesia. One form that such a critical memory might assume is a counter-narrative of the institution of the subject. Another is a counter-history of the commodity structure, one that insisted on a disclosive perspective on commodities in which their ‘metaphysical subtleties’ fell away to reveal the physical, human contours of the alienated labour necessary for their production and dissemination, a recovery of what Bourdieu called the ‘genesis narrative’ of the commodity itself.²⁵ This position leads to the possibility of a critical-materialist theory of temporality, of the social construction of time according to concrete material conditions; at the heart of any such theory would stand the status of the commodity as a tension-laden temporal structure.²⁶ A third possibility is the development of a theory of intergenerational justice; or, as in the later work of Max Horkheimer, an attempt to derive moral insights from the very impossibility of such intergenerational justice.²⁷ Moral indignation at the irredeemability of past suffering evaporates the utopian dimension of critical theory: memory of past suffering cannot be reconciled with a future present of emancipation conceived of as fulfilment. But a strong tradition within first

generation Critical Theory identified just this situation as a motor for critical insight and political engagement.²⁸

(c) Natural History as a Transformation of Subject-Object Relationships: *Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt*

The claim of a deep connection between reification and the refusal to allow physical suffering to register in memory needs to be read alongside the more familiar, if equally cryptic evocation of a “remembrance [*Eingedenken*] of nature in the subject.”²⁹

While never adequately developed (while certainly never even approaching the level of a ‘theory’ of memory, which at this point would appear to be virtually the only thing required), this notion of *Eingedenken* crystallises the normative claim of the concept of natural history, for it demands that we take seriously the possibility that the only possible convergence of subjectivity, and that which lies outside it, other than the self-consuming and inherently violent dialectic of self-assertion through self-identification, of conceptualisation through eating, is in effect an anamnestic one.³⁰ *Eingedenken* refers to the capacity of the subject to allow thought to be permeated with that which it is not without this provoking an allergic abreaction; conversely (a reversal built into the grammatical ambiguity of the formula *Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt*), this unknown faculty also refers to the possibility that nature could allow itself to be contacted without reverting, in the very process, to a form of myth: ‘Thinking,’ reads the bad news of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “in whose mechanism of compulsion nature is reflected and persists, inescapably reflects its very own self as its own forgotten nature—as a mechanism of compulsion.”³¹ Hence the structural ambiguity in Horkheimer and Adorno’s account when it comes to describing the possibility of *some* alternative or escape from this inescapable mechanism. The eccentric term *Eingedenken* splits the difference amongst several possibilities, since it might refer to an act or even a faculty of remembering, of recuperating a past experience in the form of a mental representation [*Erinnerung*]; or might just as well hint at some vaguer capacity that could, as Benjamin thought, be described in terms of a mimetic *faculty* that has been walled over in the course of historical time; or might just as well be defined only negatively as a pervasive sense of having

forgotten something unrecoverable, which now presses on the limits of subjective consciousness without ever reaching the force of a Proustian involuntary memory or a Freudian-style *Aha-Erlebnis*, the two models of super-subjective, shattering-redeeming memory on which this period, so intent in any case on the phenomenon of personal memory, seems to have fixated. *Eingedenken*, which is most frequently translated as ‘mindfulness’, seems to invite all these possibilities; in any event, the paradox on which all these rest is also encoded in the word, since to speak at all of an *Eingedenken* of nature in the subject is to refer at least implicitly to the possibility of remembering what has been forgotten: in this case not just the suffering of history, but of the very act of having forgotten it in the first place. To speak of *Eingedenken* is to remember that one once had it, which entails the remembering of the historical loss of memory; what on the surface appears a logical *cul-de-sac*. To remember the forgetting of historical suffering is, however, apparently the task that the truly reasonable moment of enlightenment has left to accomplish; like the fragment “*Le Prix du Progres*,” the introduction of *Eingedenken* at the end of the introductory chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes this as its goal: once again, the notion of historical progress is opposed to the material suffering that underwrites it, and the purely moral task of reason is to find a way of *thinking* back into the image of history, under the sign of transience, all that which is historical precisely by not being remembered. Just as in the Benjaminian conception, the concept of natural history calls for the vision of human history as a *Leidensgeschichte*. The ‘entities’ that appear in it under the sign of transience are persons about whom we only know that they are immemorable, not because they are not empirically remembered but because they are committed to an historical span which is dedicated to ensuring that they are not remembered, since it has no mechanism for coping with suffering in history (in fact suffering *as* history) save for its efficient elimination.

This sort of recovery project is, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and other of Adorno’s works often related to the critique of the ‘effacement’ or forgetting of death in modern society. For example, the notes to the former work will mention a ‘theory of ghosts’ (a passage certainly more Horkheimerian than Adornian) that castigates the incapacity of modern subjects to cope with the death of others as a symptom of the progressive tendency toward the fragmentation of life and memory as such:

The disturbed relationship with the dead—forgotten and embalmed—is one of the symptoms of the sickness of experience today. One might almost say that the notion of human life as the unity in the history of an individual has been abolished: the life of the individual is defined only by its opposite, destruction, but all harmony and all continuity of conscious and involuntary memory have lost their meaning.³²

As the moral dimension of natural history, *Eingedenken* is meant to disclose the world as a *Leidensgeschichte*. Disclosive memory—that is the only thing to call it at this point—does not ‘rescue’ or ‘redeem’ past suffering, unless we simply choose to use these religiously freighted words to refer to the perfectly secular task of forbidding a forgetfulness on the basis of some other consideration than efficiency. And in this sense, the end-result of this second dimension of natural history is the imperative of a kind of remembering solidarity; solidarity with the anonymous victims of a history of violence in which the past and present interpenetrate.³³ “Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.”³⁴

This moral imperative, which reaches a kind of mournful crescendo in the concluding moments of *Negative Dialectics*, is, probably with good reason, usually regarded as a sort of theoretical finale for the authors of classical critical theory, in the sense that an ‘anamnesic solidarity’ with the past shatters the last possibility for theoretical elaboration, thus jettisoning the last possibility for a rational *Letztbegründung* of the normative dimension of critique, and thereafter gliding gently into the consolations of religion, as in the late Horkheimer, or art, as in the late Adorno, or some psychoanalytic no-man’s land between the two, as in the rhapsodic invocation of redemptive memory in the concluding pages of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation*.³⁵ Indeed the prevailing interpretation of first generation critical theory associates the turn to memory with capitulation, pessimism, and the hermeticism of modernist art. This ‘message in a bottle’ reading of critical memory was promulgated largely by Habermas himself in the sections on Horkheimer and Adorno in the first volume of the *Theory of Communicative Action*, and the chapter on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.³⁶

Given the ultimate fate of the natural history concept in Adorno's own work, as we shall see, this interpretation remains largely, albeit incompletely, justified. It could also be said, though, that the turn to the past in critical theory is, in its normative dimension, not so much an act of capitulation, or the adoption of a merely retrospective stance upon the historical process in the face of the aporetic consequences of the thesis of the 'context of total domination,' but rather that it is just this turn to the past that allows the hegemonic facade of this thesis to crumble a bit. For if, in the case of Adorno, the normative formulation of the concept of natural history contains a moral imperative to establish a new vision of the past in the name of a barely articulable solidarity with the transient, then the *manner* in which this is to be done need not at all be thought of in the dismal terms of the *Aesthetic Theory*. I had earlier talked about the crumbling of any serene sense of diachrony in Adorno's work as a complication, rather than an evaporation of time; in his earliest theoretical works, Adorno understood the normative imperative implicit in the concept of natural history to combine with the methodological dimension of this idea, in the project of the philosophical interpretation of the historically singular and contingent itself. In the concept of natural history, the thought of that which is historically contingent, its physiognomic reconstruction in the interpretive act itself both names and in the process violates the spell of transience. In *Negative Dialectics*, this methodology becomes explicit:

The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are non-conceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato have been dismissed as transitory and insignificant, as a *quantite negligeable*.³⁷

The effort to think the particular is in essence an attempt to allow the appearance of what resists conceptual determination to appear, even if only as a negative, within the very totalising work of the identifying concept itself. This leads the *Negative Dialectics* in the direction of a micrology: the search for a method for encountering the concrete "compels our thinking to abide with minutiae. We are not to philosophise about concrete things; we are to philosophise, rather, out of these things."³⁸ This is a "philosophy in fragment form."³⁹ Still what is so noticeable about Adorno's later theoretical work is its absence of the concrete, which is to say its stubborn concentration on the

problem of the conceptual relation to concretion without the parallel attempt to present the concrete character itself: in contrast to his earlier works, the image-character of the later theoretical works dries up and vanishes. Certainly the *intention* of a kind of Benjaminian 'objective meaning' meant to spring suddenly from constructed constellations of the most graphic and concrete historical material does not disappear in Adorno's later theoretical work, as attested by the following quote which borrows from the 1932 essay but slants its language decidedly toward the theological:

This is the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularises metaphysics in the secular category pure and simple; the category of decay. Philosophy interprets that pictography, the ever new Mene Tekel, in microcosm—in fragments which decay has chipped, and which bear the objective meanings. No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.⁴⁰

As is well-known Adorno's later writings appeal increasingly to art to describe what he simultaneously insists to be the purely philosophical task of interpreting objective reality by the analysis of its most concrete elements. The shocking emergence of a recovered image from the past that such a process seems to have been aiming at is in the later Adorno increasingly attributed to that moment in modern art where mimesis and rationality can however momentarily interact. For this, Proust seems to be Adorno's chief referent: what earlier had been conceived as the momentary interpenetration of the elements of prehistory with the most recent is in Proust recast as the interpenetration of early childhood and the reflective powers of adult life. Thus, Proust's involuntary memory as a product of the extreme development of the perspective of natural history: the extraordinary character of Proust's prose lies in the fact that,

the reader feels addressed by it as by an inherited memory, an image that suddenly flashes out, perhaps in a foreign city, an image that one's own parents must have seen long before one's own birth . . . Proust looks at even adult life with such alien and wondering eyes that under his immersed gaze the present is virtually transformed into prehistory, into childhood.⁴¹

Proust's sensitivity to the sign of transience leads him to the heroic effort to transform the very images of transience themselves (which are always linked to suffering) with a tremendous desire for happiness, which for Adorno appears to be something like the recuperation of an absolute presence or the birth of an absolute present:

The polarity of happiness and transience directs [Proust] to memory. Undamaged experience is produced only in memory, far beyond immediacy, and through memory, aging and death seem to be overcome in the aesthetic image. But this happiness achieved through the rescue of an image, a happiness that will not let anything be taken from it, represents the unconditional renunciation of consolation. Rather the whole of life be sacrificed for complete happiness than one bit of it be accepted that does not meet the criterion of utmost fulfilment. This is the inner story of the *Remembrance of Things Past*. Total reminiscence is the response to total transience, and hope lies only in the strength to become aware of transience and preserve it in writing.⁴²

In this writing Adorno seems to have seen the realisation—in the form of the literary novel, in any case—of the moment of natural history in which the span of historical time as *Leidensgeschichte* is momentarily abridged through the recovery of an element of absolute concreteness within it; here once again natural history emerges as the temporary unity of methodology and something that can still be called a moral intuition: the artwork alone is capable of representing universality in its very dwelling on the tiniest fragmentary detail of its subject matter.

III

Adorno's concept of natural history begins as a programmatic proposal for an alternative methodology for critical sociology; it ends in a theory of aesthetic modernity. That was Adorno's trajectory; it need not be the trajectory of the concept of natural history itself. The elements I have sketched above comprise challenges and resources—problems and opportunities—for the discursive model of critical social theory. In this concluding section, I will make some suggestive comments on how these problems and opportunities can be taken.

Habermas' discourse-theoretical revision of critical theory is in very large measure, a stage in a longer relationship between philosophy and philosophical anthropology. Habermas' own theoretical trajectory shows this clearly enough; the high-water mark of Habermas' own efforts to re-appropriate the progressive German tradition of philosophical anthropology through American pragmatism, in the essays on the reconstruction of historical materialism and in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, yielded to a far more anti-naturalist position with the turn to universal pragmatics, and ever since that anti-naturalist turn Habermas has consistently rejected the prospect of a mutually open dialogue between naturalist and anti-naturalist interpretations of communicative reason.

The reasons for this inflexibility are in fact extremely complex and involve both factors internal to discourse theory and external, historical factors specific to the political and cultural context in which Habermas has worked. Habermas has always been acutely aware of the political and normative implications of philosophical anthropology. He has remained highly sensitive to the resources of the progressive, social-democratic tradition of German philosophical anthropology running from (Jena period) Hegel through the Left Hegelians, Marx, the social-democratic wing of neo-Kantians (Cassirer) and progressive German sociology (Plessner). But the culturally conservative tradition of German philosophical anthropology, which appropriated discourses from the natural sciences in order to justify strong institutions as compensations for the vulnerabilities of a fragile and under-adapted human organism is for Habermas an *ongoing* threat to critical social science.⁴³ That tradition culminated in the work of Arnold Gehlen, Adorno's arch-nemesis in the battle over the status of sociology, the image of the public intellectual, and the conception of democratic life of the early Federal Republic. Yet for Habermas, who has carried the battle against Gehlen onward to the present day, *both* Adorno and Gehlen represent the unwelcome consequences of a pessimistic philosophical anthropology; both read the history of reason back to the species-time of a vulnerable and violent animal, and while Adorno and Gehlen draw different political conclusions from this history, both conclusions (defeatist, in Adorno's case; reactionary and anti-democratic in Gehlen's) are the results of unwarranted philosophical premises. Both Gehlen and Adorno fail to distinguish natural-scientific and normative discourses adequately—meaning they fail to iden-

tify a communicative as well as a strategic mode of rationality. Both misdiagnose the pathologies and promises of social modernity. Both are consigned to the rogue's gallery of the philosophical discourse of modernity, Adorno with frustrated affection and regret, Gehlen with undying enmity.

Here, my suspicion is that a re-appropriation of Adorno's natural history concept problematises both Habermas' position on the Adorno of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the general problem of philosophical anthropology in productive ways.

That this position stands in need of friendly problematisation is clear. Habermas' recent (2003) writings on the normative dimension of new reproductive technologies and 'genetic ethics' are collected in the short book on *The Future of Human Nature*, whose title hints at a new dialogic opening between the natural and normative sciences. Instead, the argument insists that the normative implications of new technologies threaten to transform the material, bodily basis for the reciprocity and symmetry conditions of intersubjective agreement (by making some embodied subjects conscious of the bodily basis of their existence as the consequence of the asymmetrical choices of another subject).⁴⁴ For Habermas, sober, moral (deontological) arguments concerning the need to protect the conditions for intersubjective reciprocity intermingle with a palpable horror at the spectre of a humanity transforming its own bodily existence through a 'positive eugenics' increasingly beyond discursive regulation. It is this horror (traceable, no doubt, to historically concrete causes) that actually drives the argument; Habermas argues that a properly conducted moral discourse on the implications of new technologies could only result in placing strong limits on individual therapies and procedures, thus making current discursive outcomes definitive for the kind of future debates that *ought not* to happen. Moral argumentation is appropriated as a theoretical dam to contain future discourses that do not conform to the current interpretation of what does and does not count as the protection of the 'deontic shell' of vulnerable subjects. While natural history in Adorno's sense does not offer any unambiguous answers to the problem of Habermas' flat refusal of philosophical anthropology, it insists that the stark either/or between naturalist and anti-naturalist positions in epistemology is impossible to sustain: natural history, as a dialectical construction, demands the ongoing interrogation of the postulates on which anti-naturalism rests, and suggests that

such postulates revert to their opposite under the pressure of reflection. This may mean nothing beyond the well-intentioned reminder of the project of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, in which the epistemic accomplishments of speakers and hearers was rooted in the species-specific history of the human animal. It might serve as support for the critical-theoretical re-appropriation of philosophical anthropology, a project Axel Honneth began with *The Struggle for Recognition*. Or, in the natural-historical posing of the question of meaning in history, it might serve as a challenge to the vestigial philosophy of historical progress implicit in the *Theory of Communicative Action*'s conception of social modernity as social and cultural learning processes.

This last suggestion leads to an inquiry on the 'presentism' of discourse theory; its evacuation of the category of memory. An assumption of discourse theory seems to be that, in the paradigm-shift to intersubjectivity and the adoption of a rigorously postmetaphysical philosophical perspective, one simply parts company from the older problematics of time-consciousness (which would appear hopelessly mired in a monological philosophy of consciousness, as part of a doctrine of faculties or a phenomenology of perception), and the philosophy of history (which would be an non-recuperable bit of metaphysics). This rejection however, in the absence of anything to replace it, does occasionally give the impression that discourse theory in general is characterised as 'presentism': there is very little sense of the past in the theory of communicative action, apart from its unproblematic status as the material for rational reconstruction, or of developmental levels left behind in the process of modernisation and differentiation of lifeworlds. The time of justification, like the time of obligation, is always Now; the tension between fact and norm is one free of diachrony, insofar as it juxtaposes a here-now of a given validity claim with a context-transcendence of justificatory inclusion that assumes an open-ended future and a finished past. One might initially ask, then, whether there is a way that the 'shocking' perspective of natural history, transposed from a subject-nature model to one of intersubjectivity, might enter into this unproblematic view of the collective past and of shared time, and problematise it a bit.

The normative kernel of the methodological practice of rational reconstruction is itself motivated by the basic normative orientation of universalism: from the point of view of discourse theory, the past appears as a field of vio-

lently missed opportunities for consensus, making 'reconstruction' itself a form of critical memory, since the theoretical reconstruction of universal competence is not allowed to conduct itself in ignorance of the concrete historical circumstances in which this competence were or were not permitted to develop.

Moreover, such a view opens up the prospect of the past as *Leidensgeschichte*—now no longer understood in terms of the failed interactions between subjectivity and nature, or even primarily as the medium of bodily suffering condemned to oblivion, but rather as the world of all unsuccessful or thwarted efforts at communicatively coordinated interaction, all misfired intersubjectivities, all systematically distorted communication. And this might act to correct the impression that one occasionally receives from Habermas' work that, while the theoretical structure intended to generate plausible explanations for the fact of injustice is powerfully developed, the reality of historical injustice, what it *looks like* to behold a world in which injustice is the norm, is so carefully excised from the level of theory (to migrate to ethical and political, contextual essays and interventions in the public sphere), that wrongness itself, whether in the form of 'systematically distorted communication' or the 'inner colonisation of the lifeworld' is articulated at a higher level of abstraction than is really necessary or even helpful. At the very least, then, perhaps Adorno's concept of natural history, translated into the pathologies of communication that cannot help but structure our view of the natural history of communicative interaction, might serve to provide an alternative idiom for the task of rational reconstruction, a more jagged and visceral language that would help demonstrate the way in which distorted communication actually manifests itself in the empirical world that theory describes. And this is precisely what is meant by the proposal to supplement discourse theory with a variant of world-disclosive language capable of opening up new modes for the understanding of the objects of criticism. There is already a large literature on the possibility of disclosive language and its relation to Habermasian theory which I will not enter into here.⁴⁵ But it is worth bearing in mind that the relation between truth claims and disclosure is dialectical. Nikolas Kompridis has argued persuasively for a view that moves beyond an antinomical either-or between disclosive and reason-giving uses of language.⁴⁶ More recently, Axel Honneth has demonstrated that the categories

of natural history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* constitute important elements of a world-disclosive mode of social criticism aimed at just those harms, losses, and pathologies that tend to slip through the net of Habermasian social theory.⁴⁷

Beyond this, however, the perspective of natural history would seem to open up another sort of question for Habermas' work, this time addressing the formalised temporalities that it depends upon. For if, as in Adorno, the vision of a *Leidensgeschichte* is rooted in the insight of a link between forgetting and domination, then one would want a more detailed picture of how forgetting is to work in a theory of communicative action in general. What is it about the shared past, from a discourse-theoretical point of view, that is lost as a result of the systematic thwarting of communicative interaction? Another way of asking this question is to wonder how, in the theory of communicative action, we are to distinguish between non-pathological and pathological collective forgetting. If modern lifeworlds are characterised above all by their changed relation to the past—if, that is, modernity itself consists of the process in which tradition, a shared past, is devalued and can no longer unproblematically serve to provide pre-formed situation interpretations and specifications of action—then how ought we to distinguish between the process of oblivion, the loss of the past, in modern lifeworlds as a result of rationalisation processes *as such*, versus those kinds of losses and oblivions that are strategic, orchestrated, and consist in the actual blocking of semantic resources from the lifeworld? I take this to be the question concerning the loss of semantic potentials for collective self-reflection that Habermas raised, but never definitively settled, in his 1972 essay on Walter Benjamin.⁴⁸ A critical theory of collective memory would also be a critical theory of collective forgetting. If lifeworlds are in essence to be understood *both* as 'storehouses' or reservoirs of 'traditional knowledge' and 'unproblematic' or 'pre-interpretive' orientations, *and* as inherently unstable, dynamic, and creative, then the process of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld (and the systemic incursions into this reproduction) would have to be explained both in terms of the retention and the disappearance of symbolic structures and semantic resources.

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Notes

- ¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos*, vol. 60, p. 117. The passage recurs in *Negative Dialektik*, p. 353.
- ² For more on this see Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1992, chapter 2.
- ³ Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," p. 118.
- ⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism. Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*, Verso, London, 1993, p. 94.
- ⁵ Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," p. 118.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ The classic English version is of course Susan Buck-Morss', *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, The Free Press, New York, 1977.
- ⁸ As Buck-Morss puts it, "Nature provided the key for exposing the non-identity between the concept of history (as a regulative idea) and historical reality, just as history provided the key for demythifying nature. Adorno argued, on the one hand, that actual past history was not identical to the concept of history (as rational progress) because of the material *nature* to which it did violence. At the same time, the 'natural' phenomena of the present were not identical to the concept of nature because [. . .] they had been historically produced." Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 49.
- ⁹ See Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, pp. 18 ff.
- ¹⁰ See Martin Seel, "On Rightness and Truth: Reflections on the Concept of World Disclosure," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 37, 1994, pp. 64-81.
- ¹¹ Adorno, "Die Aktualität der Philosophie," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I, p. 340.
- ¹² For an especially lucid account, see Wolfgang Bonss, "Empirie und Dechiffrierung von Wirklichkeit. Zur Methodologie bei Adorno," *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig von Freideburg and Jürgen Habermas, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1983.
- ¹³ Adorno, "Die Aktualitaet der Philosophie," pp. 340-341.
- ¹⁴ On this question see Max Pensky, "On Method and Time: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Images," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David Ferris, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.
- ¹⁵ See Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, chapters 3 and 6.
- ¹⁶ Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," p. 122.
- ¹⁷ For a definitive account of the intellectual foundations of natural history, see Wolf Lepenies, *Das Ende der Naturgeschichte. Wandel kultureller Selbstverständlichkeiten in den Wissenschaften des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1976.

- ¹⁸ Specifically, in Buck-Morss' *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 59. See also Jameson, *Late Marxism*, pp. 95-97.
- ¹⁹ See Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 109.
- ²⁰ See Richard Terdman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993.
- ²¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Continuum, New York, 1994, p. 229.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- ²³ See Nietzsche, *Genealogie der Moral*, 2, III, Schlechta III s, pp. 802-04.
- ²⁴ See the conclusion of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*; see also *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Jubilaeumsausgabe III, p. 202.
- ²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, quoted in Terdman, *Present Past*, p. 34.
- ²⁶ For elements of such a theory, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination. A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996. See also Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London, 1995, and H.A. Kittsteiner, "Historical Time in Karl Marx," *History and Memory*, vol. 3, no. 2, Fall-Winter, 1991, pp. 45-86.
- ²⁷ See Max Horkheimer's later essays, "Materialism and Metaphysics" and "Thoughts on Religion," where Horkheimer comments on the utopian dream of absolute or universal justice: "It is impossible that such justice should ever become a reality within history. For, even if a better society develops and eliminates the present order, there will be no compensation for the wretchedness of past ages and no end to the distress of nature. We are dealing therefore with a [Kantian] illusion, the spontaneous growth of ideas which probably arose out of primitive exchange. The principle that each one must have his share and that each one has the same basic right to happiness is a generalisation of economically conditioned rules. Their extension into the infinite. Yet the urge to such a conceptual transcending of the possible, to this impotent revolt against reality, is part of man as he has been moulded by history. What distinguishes the progressive type of man from the retrogressive is not the refusal of the idea but the understanding of the limits set to its fulfilment." Max Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Continuum, New York, 1972, pp. 129-30.
- ²⁸ On this question see the classic essay by Christian Lenhardt, "Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*," *Telos* 25, 1975, pp. 133-154, which is widely misread as arguing for a theologically-tinged conception of memory as an end in itself; in fact Lenhardt's far more radical argument was the appropriation of the memory of unredeemed suffering of a past generation as a motor for revolutionary politics.

- ²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 42.
- ³⁰ For a definitive account of the connection between *Eingedenken* and memory, see Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Das Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt. Zur Dialektik von Vernunft und Natur in der kritischen Theorie Horkheimers, Adornos, und Marcuses*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1990, especially Chapter One, "Geschichte als Natur—die Perspektive der Naturgeschichte."
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ³² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 215-16.
- ³³ An interesting discussion of this notion of "Solidarität mit dem vergangenen Leiden" can be found in Mirko Wischke, *Die Geburt der Ethik. Schopenhauer—Nietzsche—Adorno*, Akademie Verlag, Heidelberg 1994, pp. 148-155.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ³⁵ A good example would be Seyla Benhabib's *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p. 179, which describes the turn to memory in critical theory as the moment where, faced with the aporetic consequences of the thesis of a total context of domination, "critical theory no longer moves within the horizon of *prospective* future transformation, but must retreat into the *retrospective* stance of past hope and remembrance. Critical theory becomes a retrospective monologue of the critical thinker upon the totality of this historical process, for it views the lived present not through the perspective of possible future transformation, but from the standpoint of the past."
- ³⁶ For a summary of this 'message in a bottle' reading and its problems, see Max Pensky, "Beyond the Message in a Bottle: The Other Critical Theory," review essay of Alex Demirovic, *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle. Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1999, in *Constellations*, vol. 10, no. 1, March, 2003, pp. 135-144.
- ³⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Continuum, New York, 1973, p. 8.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 360.
- ⁴¹ Theodor Adorno, "On Proust," *Notes to Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, volume II, p. 315.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ⁴³ For Habermas's most recent thoughts on the social-democratic *versus* cultural-conservative dynamics within the tradition of German philosophical anthropology, see his essay "Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior: Ernst Cassirer and Arnold Gehlen in Hindsight," *Time of Transitions*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004 (forthcoming).

- ⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003.
- ⁴⁵ See the essays collected in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 3, 1993, many of which were reprinted in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 37, 1994. For Habermas' own position on world disclosure, see "Entegnung" eds. Hans Joas and Axel Honneth, *Kommunikatives Handeln*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1986.
- ⁴⁶ Nikolas Kompridis, "On World Disclosure: Heidegger, Habermas, and Dewey," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 37, 1994, pp. 29-45.
- ⁴⁷ Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations*, vol. 7, no. 1, March, 2000, pp. 116-127.
- ⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Criticism," *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983.

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